

Five lessons in global diplomacy

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The US is not just another country and its president is not just another politician. Who he is, the choices he makes, matter to billions of people around the globe.

There is no need to tell President Barack Obama that the world is messy and complicated or to list the many things that need to be done. We hope that Mr Obama and his team have also noted the places that have seen steady, sometimes dramatic, progress in recent years – China, Indonesia, Brazil and central Europe to name a few.

Successes can look after themselves. It is the problems and failures that he and others will have to focus on. In many cases, we understand the nature of the problem and even know what the solution looks like. Sometimes – in the Middle East, for example – we have known for years. The real question is how to implement it.

Of course, every country is different, every problem particular. But experience over the years (including my own) suggests some key ingredients for tackling international problems.

First, the solution is always political. Civil wars, inter-state conflicts, problems with energy, climate change or nuclear non-proliferation – all of these require political settlements that take account of the interests of all involved.

Power is about more than just military or financial muscle; legitimacy is important too. Sometimes, it is the most important element. There will be no solution in Palestine that does not take account of the rights of the Palestinians, weak as they may appear.

Second, intervention must always serve a political strategy and take account of the fact that foreign policy is all about the domestic politics of others. Domestic politics matter because they limit what is achievable in negotiations (for example, over how much carbon dioxide emissions can be reduced or tariffs cut in trade). This is never more the case than when the problem is a dispute over the control and legitimacy of the state – take the Democratic Republic of Congo or Iraq.

In the Balkans and elsewhere, the aim of crisis management has been to create a space for politics to work. But functioning politics is one thing that foreigners cannot provide; only the locals can do that.

Third, personalities and trust are essential. In a crisis, when institutions and order break down, a handful of leaders become key. For them to risk their future on a settlement requires courage. The reason dealing with Iran is so difficult is the lack of trust – on both sides. To establish at least enough trust to do business together has been my first objective. Diplomatic breakthroughs only become possible when negotiators are willing to take risks because of the trust they have built with each other.

Trust needs to be backed by tangible things: troops to police a ceasefire, trainers to build a police force, monitors for elections or at the border, military guarantees and development assistance. The European Union has ceasefire monitors in Georgia and is helping to build police or armed forces from the DRC to Afghanistan, from Kosovo to Palestine. It has also monitored many elections.

Sending monitors may seem unimpressive. But the mere presence of outside observers changes behaviour. As in physics, the act of observation modifies the behaviour of particles; though instead of producing uncertainty, political observers re-establish confidence.

Fourth, no single country, even the US, can solve problems on its own. The North Korean nuclear issue is inching forward in six-party talks that include China, Japan, South Korea and Russia. The EU has been most successful when it has worked with others: with the UN in Lebanon; with the Association of South East Asian Nations in Aceh/Indonesia; with the US everywhere.

The weakness of regional co-operation in the Middle East is both symptom and cause of the region's crisis-ridden politics. It is significant that the Arab states have written collectively to Mr Obama on the Middle East peace process. As the EU, we echo their call to push for a settlement.

In the Balkans, the EU and the US have worked consistently in partnership. So have Nato and the EU. One of my first experiences as EU high representative was working with the Nato secretary-general in Skopje on a constitutional settlement between Slav and Albanian communities. This is a reminder that almost all problems are regional and the involvement of neighbours is essential.

But increasingly, diplomacy is about more than mobilising states. We need to find ways to harness the expertise and resources of non-governmental organisations and companies and energise individuals towards shared goals.

Fifth, the best time to deal with a problem is the moment it arises, before positions become entrenched – ideally, before anyone has noticed there is a problem at all. But if that fails, you need to be ready to stick at it for a long time. The EU can be slow but it is quite good at engaging for the long term.

Ultimately, the objective of diplomacy is to create agreed rules. Rules on political participation, demarcation of borders or movements of military equipment. Rules to end conflicts within or between states. Rules to help us address the big issues of our time: climate change, non-proliferation and a sustainable and open global economy.

The accumulation of rules, procedures and institutions sounds like dreary work but it is what global civilisation is built on. Agreed rules make states secure and people free.

The **start of a US administration** is a special moment. The US and Europe should use it to recommit themselves to the task of building rules, trust and partnerships for our global world.

The writer is EU high representative for common foreign and security policy